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Ex-Lawmaker Behind 'Don't Say Gay' Bill Sentenced For COVID-19 Fraud Charges

Former Florida state Rep. Joe Harding was handed a federal prison sentence after pleading guilty to fraudulently obtaining a $150,000 pandemic loan.

By Nina Golgowski

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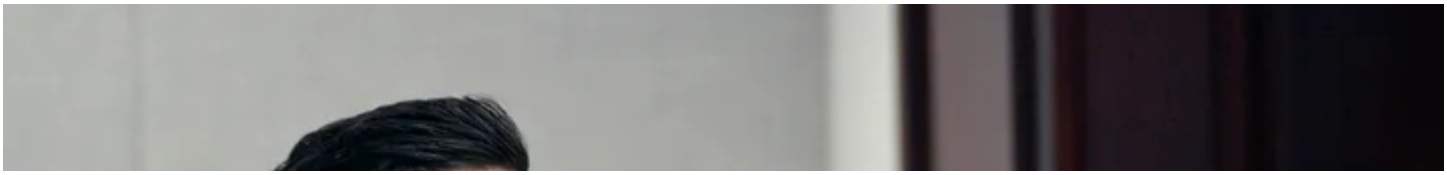
A former Florida state representative who sponsored a controversial "Don't Say Gay" bill in his state has been sentenced to four months in federal prison after pleading guilty to fraudulently acquiring $150,000 in COVID-19 relief funds.

Joe Harding, a 36-year-old Republican who resigned from office following his indictment in December, received the sentence Thursday for wire fraud, money laundering and making false statements related to the federal funds.

He is set to surrender to authorities on Jan. 29, according to court records. He will have two years of supervision following his release.

"Today's sentence both punishes the defendant's criminal conduct and should serve as a significant deterrent to others who would selfishly steal from their fellow citizens to unlawfully enrich themselves," said U.S. Attorney Jason Coody of the Northern District of Florida, who announced the sentence in a press release.



Former Florida state Rep. Joe Harding, seen in early 2022, was sentenced for wire fraud, money laundering and making false statements. VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

John Lauro, Harding's attorney, told HuffPost that the former lawmaker repaid the money, with interest, and "took full responsibility for his actions."

"The loan was paid back in its entirety under the terms of the loan agreement. It was paid back in full before any charges were brought," Lauro said in a phone interview Friday. "Joe operated fully with the authorities in connection with describing and disclosing what had happened."

Lauro is also defending former President Donald Trump against charges related to his alleged role in the 2021 riot at the U.S. Capitol and his attempts to overturn the 2020 election.

Harding fraudulently obtained a coronavirus-related small-business loan during the pandemic and then deposited some of the money into his personal bank account and into a third-party business bank

they added.

Prosecutors argued in court that although Harding ultimately repaid the money, his actions still had a harmful effect on the government relief program and diminished the assistance available to small businesses with legitimate needs.

“When an unqualified recipient fraudulently acquires such funds, it erodes the mission and purpose of the government benefit program in that the number of qualified recipients who can obtain such benefits is reduced,” Coody said in a court document.

Harding had suggested it was all a misunderstanding in a statement following his indictment late last year, but said he would resign so he wasn’t a distraction in state government.

He pleaded guilty to the charges in March, at which point he faced up to 35 years in prison.

Harding was elected to the Florida Legislature in 2020. He became known the following year for sponsoring a House version of legislation that forbids public school students, from kindergarten through third grade, from learning about sexual orientation and gender identity in the classroom.

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